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The Soviet Propaganda Offensive

A courageous revelation in Moscow and new evidence of Marxist infiltration of the Roman Catholic Church in El Salvador are current reminders of the Kremlin's persistence in attempting to mislead and manipulate public opinion at home and abroad.

While the best-selling novel *The Spike* is an overblown dramatization of the danger of this Russian disinformation campaign, there is no doubt that in the real world the Soviets succeed more often than the Western press would like to admit in distorting the news.

If it had not been for the extraordinary courage of the Russian ballet dancer, Yuri Stepanov, the only available account of his reasons for returning to Russia after a two-month defection to the U.S. would have been the *Izvestia* interview with him in Moscow after his return.

Trying to discourage future defections, *Izvestia* quoted Stepanov as finding the U.S. a "nightmare" of violence and as outraged by CIA attempts to coerce him into spying. Shocked by this complete distortion of the facts, Stepanov, at great personal risk, sought out American correspondents in Moscow to explain that he has the most friendly feelings toward the U.S. and only returned to Russia because of concern for his wife's welfare.

Recalling that the KGB had threatened to break his legs if he did not keep silent, the dancer explained that he had to speak out to correct the record and concluded "it is a question of honor." Stepanov's personal integrity has put a spike in the wheels of Moscow's mighty disinformation machine.

Marxists in El Salvador

Meanwhile, in a much more complex and damaging disinformation operation, there is now evidence that the Marxists have succeeded in infiltrating and winning over influential elements within the Catholic hierarchy in El Salvador, including Jesuit priests and lay workers. According to a recent report from the U.S. Embassy in San Salvador, Archbishop Arturo Rivera has reluctantly concluded that he has to remove from his Catholic organization radical priests and laymen who are actively supporting the communist guerrillas.

In his first move, the archbishop has fired the Salvadoran staff of the Catholic relief organization, Caritas, for complicity in hiding arms caches for the guerrillas in church refugee camps. Although proceeding cautiously because of threats to his life, Rivera is determined to weed out communist sympathizers in the Catholic radio station and newspaper who have astutely tilted their reporting to favor the guerrilla cause.

While declaring the Church neutral in the political struggle and condemning the right-wing terror, Rivera has lent his full support to President Duarte's land reform and stated that the guerrillas "have made violence and loyalty to Marxism their watchword, and because of that the majority have turned their backs on them."

In his increasingly outspoken criticism of communist tactics, the redoubtable archbishop has staked out a position that contrasts with the stance of American Catholic bishops. In view of Rivera's conviction that the Salvadoran Church itself has been infiltrated, the American hierarchy might want to take a close look at their reporting from Church sources in San Salvador. They may be victims of a very sophisticated disinformation campaign.

As the record of The New York Times demonstrates, even the most prestigious American newspapers are not immune to occasional deceptions perpetrated against them. In her column on the op-ed page of the Times on March 6, Flora Lewis quoted at length and approvingly from what she described as a "dissent paper" drawn up by people from the NSC, the State and Defense Departments and the CIA, dated Nov. 6, '80. She stated that this document "has been circulated in the manner prescribed when a policy has been established but serious doubts remain among an important group of knowledgeable officers."

A "Spurious" Document

She urged the Reagan administration to heed the call of the authors of this document for immediate negotiations with the communist guerrillas, but unfortunately the authors could not be found and no such official dissent paper existed. As certified by the State Department, the document she quoted was "spurious" and the authors of this fabrication have preserved their anonymity.

On March 7, the Times tried to explain that Miss Lewis had received the document from a news source she considered reliable and Miss Lewis in a subsequent column admitted her mistake. But the damage had been done and Castro will exploit the original column throughout the hemisphere to prove the U.S. government is deeply split.

There is no evidence that the Soviets or Cubans had anything to do with this ingenious hoax but domestic practitioners of the black art of disinformation have learned lessons from them. U.S. editors need to maintain the healthy scepticism that is the saving grace of journalism.